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# Isabella Thoburn

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**I**SABELLA THOBURN, the first missionary of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society, was born on a farm near St. Clairsville, Ohio, March 29, 1840. She was peculiarly fortunate in her ancestry — that happy mingling known as Scotch-Irish — and in the influences surrounding her early years. With parents intelligent and strong, making the Christian life real to their children and filled with the missionary spirit, she received a rich inheritance of faith and the added qualities of endurance and vision that fitted her for the pioneer work of her mature years.

Her education was begun in the local district school and continued in the Female Seminary of Wheeling, West Virginia. After graduation she taught for a time, and then returned to the seminary — which had in the meantime been elevated to collegiate rank — completing an advanced course marked out by herself. Later she studied for a year in an art school in Cincinnati. Leaving school with a well disciplined mind and a finely cultivated literary taste, she again entered upon a varied experience in teaching, filling positions of increasing responsibility and adding to her foundation work — the best to be had at the time — the practical experience that was preparing her to

become our foremost educator in a foreign land.

Miss Thoburn's literary ability was of a high order and the temptation to enter upon this sort of a career was at one time very strong. Similarly, when the Civil War made its demands upon her sympathies, she displayed rare skill as a nurse, and thought seriously of entering upon regular training. But the latter experience like all others in her early life, was but a preparation for what was to follow.

Although she was a deeply spiritual woman, Miss Thoburn could never point to the day or hour of her conversion. She seems to have unfolded like a flower in the sunlight of God's love, developing so gradually that she arrived at the beauty of full bloom, unconscious of the change. Although reared in a home where missions were constantly the subject of prayer and of self-sacrificing giving, and from which later a brother went to India, she did not early have a distinct call to foreign mission work. Her thought was simply to fit herself as best she might for the work that the Master should send to her.

But the definite call was soon to come, and through her brother — now one of India's four missionary bishops — in whose work she was already greatly interested. The peculiar disabilities of the women of India, due to a long-continued system of deprivation and degradation, offered a difficult problem in the evangelization of that great land, which no man — however able or consecrated — could solve.

Writing to his sister of his desire to establish a school for women, Dr. Thoburn put to her the question : "How would you like to come out and take charge of such a school ? " He wrote almost carelessly, scarcely expecting an answer. What was his surprise to receive by return steamer the response : "I shall come as soon as a way is open for me to do so."

Isabella Thoburn's higher call had come, but with the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church actually embarrassed by the appearance of a woman candidate for the foreign field, "the way" seemed as yet scarcely open. God had His own plan, however, and even then was prompting the hearts of Mrs. Dr. Butler and Mrs. Dr. Parker — recently returned from India, and burdened with the needs of India's daughters — to find "the way." This was nothing less than the organization of a new foreign missionary society.

The dramatic story of the founding of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society cannot be repeated here. Its first missionary candidate, all unknown to the little group of women who met that stormy March day in Boston, was waiting in Ohio, equally unaware that the agency that should enable her to go was at hand, but it was not long before the meeting took place, and Miss Thoburn, with Dr. Swain — divinely called at this same time to the ministry of healing — sailed for India, to "lay broad and deep" the foundations of the many-sided work of the Society. This was in the year 1869. It is difficult to decide



which had the greater faith — the few women who sent the missionaries out, not knowing whence should come the money for their support, or the two who went forth with no path marked out, no precedents to guide them, blazing their own trail, like the traveler in a virgin forest.

With her remarkable grasp of the needs of a situation, Miss Thoburn saw at once that educational work was a fundamental necessity for the women of India. But at precisely this point she met with determined opposition, not only from the native Hindus — to whom the idea was nothing less than preposterous — but from English and American residents as well, who timorously feared the outcome of educating the native women.

She held steadily to her conviction, however, and soon opened a little school in the Aminabad bazaar, Lucknow, where gathered seven timid girls and the “adventurous lady teacher who had coaxed them to come.” This school was soon transferred to a private room, and later to a private house, and at length its numbers had so increased — and the Society at home had so gained in strength — that it was removed to Lal Bagh, *the Rose Garden*, a beautiful estate purchased from its Moslem owner at a cost of \$7,000.

At the close of the first year in this new location — the most desirable in the city of Lucknow — the school was made a boarding school, thus greatly enhancing its possibilities and providing the home, whose atmosphere of Christian love and gracious hospitality was the appropriate

setting for the great work of its founder. The curriculum was gradually enlarged and the courses made more advanced, and finally, in 1887, the school became the Lucknow Woman's College — the first Christian college for women in all Asia. It was a glad day when this advance was made, for it meant that in her unceasing battle against apathy and determined opposition Miss Thoburn had won the victory for the education of India's womanhood. That the school should later bear her name was but a fitting recognition of her work.

The college is affiliated with the University of Calcutta, and upon passing the necessary examinations its graduates receive a degree and a diploma to which the seal of the University is affixed. The brilliant record made by some of the candidates attests the strength of the curriculum and the efficiency of its teaching force. Merely intellectual training, however, was by no means Miss Thoburn's ideal. Her girls were to be trained for service, for she wisely saw that only by trained *native* women can the great mass of India's womanhood be redeemed. Phoebe Rowe, the sweet singer, with her wonderful power as an evangelist, and Lilavati Singh, with her brilliant scholarship and devoted Christian character, are typical exponents of the training to which the Isabella Thoburn College is pledged, and its graduates are making themselves felt in every branch of Christian work, as teachers, missionaries, physicians, writers, and centers of Christian homes.

Miss Thoburn's labors were not con-

fined exclusively to the school, but she found time to establish Sunday schools, to visit in the zenanas, to found the Girls' High School in Cawnpore, and to edit for a time one of the zenana papers established by the Society during the centennial year of Methodism (1883). Not least of all, while on her second visit to the home land—a health leave of five years—she aided Mrs. Lucy Ryder Meyer in establishing the Chicago Deaconess Training School, and, seeing the great value of such work for India, she took the full course herself in order that she might adequately project this new enterprise on her return. Later she inaugurated a similar work in Cincinnati.

Her third visit to America was made the occasion of a plea for funds for her beloved college. Accompanied by Miss Singh she went up and down this broad land making addresses and appeals. The call was heard by many consecrated young women, and the needs of the college were most effectively brought home to the heart and conscience of the Church.

She went back to India and was again happy and busy in her work, when suddenly, without warning, she was not, for God took her. She died as she had wished, quickly, and without a long season of suffering, of Asiatic cholera, the dread disease through which she had nursed so many. Her last day on earth was full of duties lovingly performed; had she known that it was the last, she could not have used it better.

No woman in Methodism was more widely known or more highly revered. Her death was deplored as an irreparable loss to the work in India, but she had laid its foundations too deep to be shaken, even by her own withdrawal, and the impress of her character upon her fellow workers is so abiding that they feel the added responsibility of doing the work as she would have done it herself.

What she was to the church is well known : a great leader with a far-reaching vision ; with the faith that removes mountains ; with the tact, insight into character, broad sympathies, and strong intellect that set her apart for her great work. What she was to those who felt the rare charm of her personality, who saw the brave life, lived day by day as in the sight of Him who is invisible, who caught a glimpse of her own vision of India redeemed,— this is too sacred for words. What she was to the women of India, to whom she brought education and the gospel of Christ and for whom she gave her life, — this will be seen more and more as the years go by and the waves of influence reach out farther and farther, but it will never be fully known until we stand in the presence of the Master and see the full meaning of a life utterly surrendered to His service.

